

June 16, 2017

Via FOIA Online

National Freedom of Information Officer
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
1200 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW (2822T)
Washington, DC 20460
(202) 566-1667

**Re: Request for Records Regarding Voluntary Withdrawal and
Administrative Closure of FOIA Requests**

Dear FOIA Officer:

I write on behalf of the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) to request disclosure of records pursuant to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), 5 U.S.C. § 552, and applicable Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) regulations at 40 C.F.R. §§ 2.100–2.406.

I. Description of Records Sought

Please produce records of the following types in EPA's possession, custody or control:

1. All records from June 16, 2016, through present reflecting communications between a FOIA officer within EPA's Office of Environmental Information and a FOIA requester that contain the phrases "voluntary withdrawal," "voluntarily withdraw," or "voluntarily withdrawn."
2. All records from June 16, 2016, through present reflecting communications between a FOIA officer within EPA's Office of Environmental Information and a FOIA requester that contain the phrases "administratively closed" or "administratively close."
3. All records from June 16, 2016, through present reflecting communications between Sineta Brown (EPA HQ Office of Water) and a FOIA requester that contain the phrases "voluntary withdrawal," "voluntarily withdraw," or "voluntarily withdrawn."

4. All records from June 16, 2016, through present reflecting communications between EPA Region 10 Assistant Regional Counsel Ashley Palomaki and a FOIA requester that contain the phrases “voluntary withdrawal,” “voluntarily withdraw,” or “voluntarily withdrawn.”
5. All records from June 16, 2016, through present reflecting communications between EPA Attorney Advisor Victoria Clarke (Office of General Counsel) and a FOIA requester that contain the phrases “voluntary withdrawal,” “voluntarily withdraw,” or “voluntarily withdrawn.”

In this request, the term “records” means anything denoted by the use of that word or its singular form in the text of FOIA and includes correspondence, memoranda, notes, emails, text messages, notices, facsimiles, orders, filings, and other writings (handwritten, typed, electronic, or otherwise produced, reproduced, or stored). This request seeks responsive records in the custody of the EPA Office of Environmental Information and the custodians listed in Requests 3 through 5.

II. Request for a Fee Waiver

NRDC requests that EPA waive any fee it would otherwise charge for search and production of the records described above. FOIA dictates that requested records be provided without charge “if disclosure of the information is in the public interest because it is likely to contribute significantly to public understanding of the operations or activities of the government and is not primarily in the commercial interest of the requester.” 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii); *see also* 40 C.F.R. § 2.107(l)(1). The requested disclosure would meet both requirements.

A. NRDC Satisfies the First Fee Waiver Requirement

The disclosure requested here would be “likely to contribute significantly to public understanding of the operations or activities of the government.” 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii); 40 C.F.R. § 2.107(l)(1). Each of the four factors used by EPA to evaluate the first fee waiver requirement indicates that a fee waiver is appropriate for this request. *See* 40 C.F.R. § 2.107(l)(2).

1. Subject of the request

The records requested here relate to EPA’s compliance with its obligations under FOIA to open itself to the light of public scrutiny. As part of communications with requesters, EPA officials sometimes state—without any statutory basis under FOIA—that they will deem a request “voluntarily withdrawn” or “administratively closed” if a requester does not respond within a short period. This request seeks

records since June 16, 2016, within the EPA's Office of Environmental Information and from certain other custodians that reflect this practice. The requested records thus directly concern "the operations or activities of the government." 40 C.F.R. § 2.107(l)(2)(i).

2. *Informative value of the information to be disclosed*

The requested records are "likely to contribute to" the public's understanding of government operations and activities. 40 C.F.R. § 2.107(l)(2)(ii). These records are not currently in the public domain. The public does not currently possess comprehensive records showing how frequently EPA threatens to deem a FOIA request "voluntarily withdrawn" or "administratively closed," rather than providing a final response as required by FOIA.

There is more than a reasonable likelihood that these records have informative value to the public. *See Citizens for Responsibility & Ethics in Washington v. U.S. Dep't of Health & Human Servs.*, 481 F. Supp. 2d 99, 109 (D.D.C. 2006). EPA receives thousands of FOIA requests each year. These requests are filed by journalists, regulated parties, non-profit organizations, and every-day citizens. The basic purpose of FOIA is, as the Supreme Court has explained, "to ensure an informed citizenry, vital to the functioning of a democratic society, needed to check against corruption and to hold the governors accountable to the governed." *NLRB v. Robbins Tire & Rubber Co.*, 437 U.S. 214, 242 (1978). Records regarding EPA's practice of threatening to terminate a FOIA request, rather than providing a final response, would meaningfully inform public understanding a topic of public interest: EPA's implementation of a statute designed "to ensure that the Government's activities be opened to the sharp eye of public scrutiny." *U.S. Dep't of Justice v. Reporters Comm. For Freedom of Press*, 489 U.S. 749, 774 (1989).

3. *Contribution to an understanding of the subject by the public is likely to result from disclosure.*

NRDC's extensive communications capabilities, and proven history of dissemination of information of public interest—including information obtained from FOIA records requests—indicate that NRDC has the ability and will to use disclosed records to reach a broad audience of interested persons with any relevant and newsworthy information the records reveal. There is a strong likelihood that disclosure of the requested records will increase public understanding of the subject matter. *See Judicial Watch, Inc. v. Rossotti*, 326 F.3d 1309, 1314 (D.C. Cir. 2003) (finding that a requester that specified multiple channels of dissemination and estimated viewership numbers demonstrated a likelihood of contributing to public understanding of government operations and activities).

NRDC intends to disseminate any newsworthy information in the released records and its analysis of such records to its member base and to the broader public, through one or more of the many communications channels referenced below. NRDC has frequently disseminated newsworthy information to the public for free, and does not intend to resell the information requested here. NRDC's more than two million members and online activists are "a broad audience of persons interested in the subject" of how agencies like EPA determine when it is appropriate to remove information, documents, or entire webpages from their websites. 40 C.F.R. § 2.107(l)(2)(iii). When combined with NRDC's communications to the public at large, the likely audience of interested persons to be reached is certainly "reasonably broad." 40 C.F.R. § 2.107(l)(2)(iii). As NRDC's long history of incorporating information obtained through FOIA into reports, articles, and other communications illustrates, NRDC is well prepared to convey to the public any relevant information it obtains through this records request.

NRDC has the ability to disseminate information collected from this FOIA request through many channels. These include, but are not limited to the following:

- NRDC's website, available at <http://www.nrdc.org>, is updated daily and draws approximately 1.3 million page views and 510,000 unique visitors per month. The new NRDC.org launched in late March 2016 and features NRDC staff blogs, original reporting of environmental news stories, and more.
- NRDC's Activist email list includes more than 2.1 million members and online activists who receive regular communications on urgent environmental issues. This information is also made available through NRDC's online Action Center at <https://www.nrdc.org/actions>.
- *NRDC This Week* is a weekly electronic environmental newsletter distributed by email to more than 86,700 subscribers, at <http://www.nrdc.org/newsletter>.
- NRDC updates and maintains several social media accounts: Facebook (565,530 followers), Twitter (195,426 followers), Instagram (37,868 followers), YouTube (19,518 subscribers), and LinkedIn (9,108 followers). We also use Medium as another distribution channel for our content (1,478 followers).

NRDC issues press releases, issue papers, and reports; directs and produces movies, such as *Sonic Sea*, *Stories from the Gulf*, and *Acid Test*, narrated by Rachel McAdams, Robert Redford, and Sigourney Weaver, respectively; participates in press conferences and interviews with reporters and editorial writers; distributes content on Huffington Post; and has more than fifty staff members dedicated to communications work.

NRDC employees provide Congressional testimony; appear on television, radio, and web broadcasts and at conferences; and contribute to numerous national newspapers, magazines, academic journals, other periodicals, and books. A few examples are provided below:

- Research article, “The requirement to rebuild US fish stocks: Is it working?” *Marine Policy*, July 2014 (co-authored by NRDC Oceans Program Senior Scientist Lisa Suatoni and Senior Attorney Brad Sewell);
- Issue brief, “The Untapped Potential of California’s Water Supply: Efficiency, Reuse, and Stormwater,” June 2014 (co-authored by NRDC Water Program Senior Attorney Kate Poole and Senior Policy Analyst Ed Osann); *see also* “Saving Water in California,” *N.Y. Times*, July 9, 2014 (discussing the report’s estimates);
- Article, “Waves of phony charges over new clean water safeguards,” *The Hill*, June 17, 2014 (by NRDC Executive Director Peter Lehner);
- Article, “Don’t Buy the Smear of the EPA,” *L.A. Times*, June 3, 2014 (by NRDC President Frances Beinecke);
- Transcript, “Conservationists Call For Quiet: The Ocean Is Too Loud!” Nat’l Pub. Radio, *All Things Considered*, July 28, 2013 (featuring NRDC Marine Mammal Protection Program Director Michael Jasny);
- Testimony of David Doniger, NRDC Climate and Air Program Policy Director and Senior Attorney, before the United States House Subcommittee on Energy and Power, June 19, 2012;
- Article, “Is there a ‘proper level’ of compliance with environmental law?” *Trends: ABA Section of Environment, Energy, and Resources Newsletter*, Jan./Feb. 2008 (authored by NRDC Senior Attorney Michael Wall);
- NRDC Document Bank, <http://docs.nrdc.org/>.

NRDC routinely uses FOIA to obtain information from federal agencies that NRDC legal and scientific experts analyze to inform the public about a variety of issues, including energy policy, climate change, wildlife protection, nuclear weapons, pesticides, drinking water safety, and air quality. Some specific examples are provided below:

- (1) In April 2014, NRDC relied on FOIA documents for a report on potentially unsafe chemicals added to food, without the safety oversight of the Food and Drug Administration or the notification of the public. The report, titled *Generally Recognized as Secret: Chemicals Added to Food in the United States*, reveals concerns within the agency about several chemicals used as ingredients in food that manufacturers claim are “generally recognized as safe”. *See also* Kimberly Kindy, “Are secret, dangerous ingredients in your food?” *Wash. Post*, Apr. 7, 2014 (discussing NRDC’s report).

- (2) NRDC obtained, through FOIA, FDA review documents on the nontherapeutic use of antibiotic additives in livestock and poultry feed. In January 2014, NRDC published a report, titled *Playing Chicken with Antibiotics*, which is based on the documents obtained, and reveals decades of hesitancy on FDA's part to ensure the safety of these drug additives. *See also* P.J. Huffstutter and Brian Grow, "Drug critic slams FDA over antibiotic oversight in meat production," *Reuters*, Jan. 27, 2014 (discussing NRDC's report).
- (3) NRDC has used White House documents obtained through FOIA and from other sources to inform the public about EPA's decision not to protect wildlife and workers from the pesticide atrazine in the face of industry pressure to keep atrazine on the market. *See Still Poisoning the Well: Atrazine Continues to Contaminate Surface Water and Drinking Water in the United States*, <http://www.nrdc.org/health/atrazine/files/atrazine10.pdf> (Apr. 2010) (update to 2009 report); *see also* William Souder, "It's Not Easy Being Green: Are Weed-Killers Turning Frogs Into Hermaphrodites?" *Harper's Bazaar*, Aug. 1, 2006 (referencing documents obtained and posted online by NRDC).
- (4) NRDC incorporated information obtained through FOIA into a report, available at <http://www.nrdc.org/wildlife/marine/sound/contents.asp>, on the impacts of military sonar and other industrial noise pollution on marine life. *See Sounding the Depths II: The Rising Toll of Sonar, Shipping and Industrial Ocean Noise on Marine Life* (Nov. 2005) (update to 1999 report). The report also relied upon and synthesized information from other sources. Since the report's publication, the sonar issue has continued to attract widespread public attention. *See, e.g.*, "Protest Raised over New Tests of Naval Sonar," Nat'l Pub. Radio, *All Things Considered*, July 24, 2007.
- (5) NRDC scientists have used information obtained through FOIA to publish analyses of the United States' and other nations' nuclear weapons programs. In 2004, for example, NRDC scientists incorporated information obtained through FOIA into a feature article on the United States' plans to deploy a ballistic missile system and the implications for global security. *See* Hans M. Kristensen, Matthew G. McKinzie, and Robert S. Norris, "The Protection Paradox," *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, Mar./Apr. 2004.
- (6) NRDC obtained through FOIA, and made public, records of the operations of the Bush administration's Energy Task Force, along with analysis of selected excerpts and links to the administration's index of

withheld documents. NRDC's efforts cast light on an issue of considerable public interest. *See, e.g.*, Elizabeth Shogren, "Bush Gets One-Two Punch on Energy," *L.A. Times*, Mar. 28, 2002, at A22.

- (7) Through FOIA, NRDC obtained a memorandum by ExxonMobil, advocating the replacement of the sitting head of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, and used the document to help inform the public about what may have been behind the Bush administration's decision to replace Dr. Robert Watson. *See* NRDC Press Release and attached Exxon memorandum, "Confidential Papers Show Exxon Hand in White House Move to Oust Top Scientist from International Global Warming Panel," Apr. 3, 2002; Elizabeth Shogren, "Charges Fly Over Science Panel Pick," *L.A. Times*, Apr. 4, 2002, at A19.
- (8) Through FOIA and other sources, NRDC obtained information on nationwide levels of arsenic in drinking water and used it in a report, *Arsenic and Old Laws* (2000), available in print and online at <http://www.nrdc.org/water/drinking/arsenic/aolinx.asp>. The report guided interested members of the public on how to learn more about arsenic in their own drinking water supplies. *Id.*; *see also* Steve LaRue, "EPA Aims to Cut Levels of Arsenic in Well Water," *San Diego Union-Tribune*, June 5, 2000, at B1 (referencing NRDC report).

As these examples demonstrate, NRDC has a proven ability to digest, synthesize, and quickly disseminate information gleaned from FOIA requests to a broad audience of interested persons. Therefore, the requested records disclosure is likely to contribute to the public's understanding of the subject.

4. Significance of the contribution to public understanding

The records requested shed light on matters of considerable public interest and concern: how EPA implements its statutory duty under FOIA to timely produce requested records about government operations. Public understanding of this topic would be significantly enhanced by disclosure of the requested records.

B. NRDC Satisfies the Second Fee Waiver Requirement

Disclosure in this case would also satisfy the second prerequisite of a fee waiver request because NRDC does not have any commercial interest that would be furthered by the requested disclosure. 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(4)(A)(iii); 40 C.F.R. § 2.107(l)(1), (3). NRDC is a not-for-profit organization and does not act as a middleman to resell information obtained under FOIA. "Congress amended FOIA to ensure that it be 'liberally construed in favor of waivers for noncommercial

requesters.” *Rossotti*, 326 F.3d at 1312 (internal citation omitted); *see NRDC v. U.S. EPA*, 581 F. Supp. 2d 491, 498 (S.D.N.Y. 2008). NRDC wishes to serve the public by reviewing, analyzing, and disclosing newsworthy and presently non-public information about the subject of this request. As noted above, work done by EPA on this topic relates to a matter of considerable public interest and concern. Disclosure of the requested records will contribute significantly to public understanding of the underlying subject matter.

III. Willingness to Pay Fees Under Protest

Please provide the records requested above regardless of your fee waiver decision. In order to expedite a response, NRDC will, if necessary and under protest, pay fees in accordance with EPA’s FOIA regulations at 40 C.F.R. § 2.107(c)(1)(iv) for all or a portion of the requested records. *See* 40 C.F.R. § 2.107(l)(4). Please contact me before doing anything that would cause the fee to exceed \$200. NRDC reserves its rights to seek administrative or judicial review of any fee waiver denial.

IV. Conclusion

Please email or (if it is not possible to email) mail the requested records to me at the NRDC office address listed below. Please send them on a rolling basis; EPA’s search for—or deliberations concerning—certain records should not delay the production of others that EPA has already retrieved and elected to produce. *See generally* 40 C.F.R. § 2.104 (describing response deadlines). If EPA concludes that any of the records requested here are publicly available, please let me know.

Please do not hesitate to call or email with questions. Thank you.

Sincerely,

/s/ Sarah C. Tallman

Sarah C. Tallman
Natural Resources Defense Council
20 N. Wacker Drive, Suite 1600
Chicago, IL 60606
312-651-7918
stallman@nrdc.org